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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
21 October 1963

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Meaning of Militarism in Latin America

Summary Conclusions

A series of sensational military coups d'etat in Latin America during the past two years has focused considerable official and public attention on the broader problem of military influence on government and politics in the area. The fundamental issues and the interpretation of these events have been sadly confused by the stereotyped, and often sanctimonious emotional treatment by journalists and academicians who consistently evaluate the coup through the lens of Anglo-Saxon political concepts: militarism is made synonymous with all authoritarianism in the area; "civilian" governments and military dictatorships" are separated into neat packages. The resulting picture is one of blacks and whites, of villains and heroes, with the military being stigmatized across the board in the process. The role of the military in Latin America is unquestionably a more responsible one, and more favorable to stability and to democracy, than it was at the turn of the century. Ever since World War II, the military has shown an increasing respect for democratic political practices and effective civilian administration. Moreover, although subjective generalizations cannot be proved or disproved, the military class has displayed a greater awareness of national goals and the crying need for socio-economic reform than other elements of the ruling oligarchies, which have tended to be reactionary in their grasp of privilege and power.

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The exercise of US pressures on the military in Latin America could have a perceptible impact on militarism and could be a strong deterrent to the use of the military coup against elected constitutional governments. Such a deterrent would not necessarily insure greater political stability or more effective civilian administration in the area. Nor would it necessarily receive the approval of the majority of the civilian regimes in Latin America, which clings tenaciously to its fundamental precept in international relations--nonintervention in the strictest juridical interpretation of the term.

Militarism is as much the by-product or reflection of political, social, and economic conditions and Latin American values and traditions as a cause of the authoritarianism and instability chronic to the area. Militarism--often erroneously equated to all authoritarianism--would not have flourished and persisted had not these fundamental conditions provided continuing nourishment. No foreign influence can easily or readily alter the imbedded political habits and institutions which are characteristic of Latin America--habits and institutions which are alien to the Anglo-Saxon and difficult to judge by Anglo-Saxon standards.

The definitive subordination of the military to civilian leadership in government and the removal of the military from politics will depend to a large degree on the demonstration by civilians of their ability to govern effectively and honestly within the Latin American framework. This in turn hinges upon the establishment of a tradition of loyal and constructive political opposition which takes its chances on victory at the ballot box to attain power and accepts the outcome with patriotism and good sportsmanship, rather than turning to the path of plotting and obstruction. Both effective civilian government and a loyal political opposition are notably lacking in Latin America. When these lacunae are filled, militarism in the area is likely to decline.

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Discussion

1. A series of sensational military coups d'etat in Latin America during the past two years has focused considerable official and public attention on the broader problem of military influence on government and politics in the area. The fundamental issues and the interpretation of these events have been sadly confused by the stereotyped and often sanctimonious emotional treatment by journalists and academicians who consistently evaluate the coup through the lens of Anglo-Saxon political concepts: militarism is made synonymous with all authoritarianism in the area; "civilian" governments and military dictatorships" are separated into neat packages. The resulting picture is one of blacks and whites, of villains and heroes, with the military being stigmatized across the board in the process.

2. An understanding in depth of militarism in Latin America--a facet of authoritarianism--requires an extensive knowledge of the traditions, history, values, and institutions of 20 sovereign nations, each with its distinctive personality, background, and internal political structure. Like all sweeping generalizations about the area, those applying to the military institution are subject to innumerable exceptions and qualifications. The military forces in Latin America have undergone a perceptible metamorphosis in recent decades; they do not act or react in predictable patterns at all times, even in the same country; their political and professional orientation varies considerably from one country to another. There has been a striking modification in recent decades of the military view of its legitimate role in politics, in professional and other training, and even in the motivation--or pretexts--for military intervention in government.

The Roots of Militarism

3. The inseparability of the armed forces, the government, and political action is probably the

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principal and most enduring characteristic of Latin American political history. Authoritarianism, whether civilian or military, was deeply imbedded in Spanish institutions at the time of the Conquest. The Conquistadores, who brought with them the religious and military zeal derived from the protracted reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from the Moors, carved out the Spanish Empire in the New World. They were literally the first men on horseback. Military men and military practices dominated, not only in the conquest and expansion of the Spanish American Empire, but in its governing institutions and practices through more than three centuries of colonial rule. A decade of wars of independence in the early 18th century spawned a generation of military caudillos. They and their successors were to hold sway in most countries throughout the century, carrying on in the normal military-authoritarian tradition inherited from the colonial era.

4. Social, economic, racial, and geographic conditions, along with the Spanish colonial legacy, promoted and sustained militarism in Latin America. Military domination of government, as symbolized in frequent coups, thus did not flourish in a vacuum. Among all elements of the politically articulate oligarchy, violence was the generally accepted method for alternation of executive power--and the executive was the only effective branch of government. Centralism, arbitrary rule, and the overwhelming dominance of the executive branch over the legislative and judiciary were institutionalized by civilians as well as military men in the presidential chair.

5. Some form of strong government or authoritarianism seemed the only feasible means of retaining power and imposing a semblance of authority over far-flung geographic areas with serious impediments to transportation and communication--areas which were by legal fiat nation-states but could not meet most of the modern criteria for this status. Neither political freedoms nor Anglo-American democratic

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practices were adaptable to inchoate nations whose populations were illiterate, impoverished, outside the stream of national life, and accustomed to a rigid caste system.

6. Constitutions incorporating the advanced liberal ideas of the American and French Revolutions were composed by the dozens. From the standpoint of implementation, however, they were sterile literary exercises and a great waste of paper, and hence were scrapped about as frequently as a new military or civilian caudillo grabbed power in any given country. An almost complete lack of political party development as we know it--except for those parties which centered around a strong-arm or demagogic type of leader--was and continues to be a characteristic of Latin America and nourishes the authoritarian tradition. In these circumstances, the army was the one durable institution through which a government career could be pursued with any degree of security and continuity.

7. In Latin America, militarism has never carried the derogatory connotation it has in the Anglo-Saxon mind. The successful military man has ranked at the top of Latin American heroes, illustrating the value which is placed on glory, bravery, and masculinity as symbolized by horse, saber, and uniform. To be sure, there are second-class heroes including poets, educators, and other civilians, but these hardly compare with Bolivar, San Martin, Artigas, Miranda, and others of the uniformed category. It is not pure coincidence that Fidel Castro retains the trappings of his guerrilla warfare campaign--fatigues, cap, the rank of major--as a constant reminder to the public of his military prowess, audacity, and success against tremendous odds.

The Persistence of Militarism

8. An explanation of the persistence of military influence, domination, and intervention in government in Latin America is highly complex. Political, social, and economic conditions which apply in

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varying degrees to most of the area seriously obstruct the growth of meaningful democracy and favor political and economic instability as well as authoritarian rule. These include high rates of illiteracy and, in several countries, the high percentage of Indian population which is outside the stream of national life; an extreme maldistribution of wealth and national income; a caste system in which the lines are sharply drawn against social mobility; widespread poverty and low levels of living; one- and two-crop economies; and imposing geographic barriers which make difficult the establishment of effective central government. The postwar phenomena of inflation, deteriorating terms of trade for commercial exports, and declining foreign exchange reserves essential to diversify the economies have compounded the already serious problems of governing.

9. In addition to the entrenched tradition of authoritarianism and centralism, exemplified by the executive domination of all branches of government, local and central, the Latin American peoples are generally accustomed to and often tend to accept a rampant spoils system, widespread bribery and corruption in administration, arbitrary electoral practices, and suppression of civil and political liberties. Constitutional law and even ordinary legislation are viewed by the Latin American as a kind of idealistic philosophy, rather than respected as measures to be applied in the real world. Military involvement in politics-- in the light of Latin American history, of the values and traditions of the ruling classes, and of the severely limited supply of administrative and leadership skills--would seem more an outgrowth of the political system than violation or deviation from it.

10. In a negative sense, the failure of civilian political leaders to develop enduring political parties with reasonable programs has either forced or provided a continuing opportunity for the military to exercise its influential role in government. Ephemeral political parties, which have generally been

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formed around a single popular leader (frequently of military background) have demonstrated a notable lack of discipline and cohesiveness. Once victorious at the polls, Latin American parties have tended to fall apart, partly because of internal dissension and jealousies. The losers, moreover, have almost invariably refused to play the role of "Loyal Opposition."

11. The civilian "outs," rejecting openly or subconsciously their loss in even relatively fair elections, generally begin to employ all the legal, quasi-legal, and extralegal tactics in the varied bag of political tricks to obstruct and undermine an incumbent regime, civilian or military. Realizing that armed forces support is usually a sine qua non of government survival, the opposition almost always seeks to foment disaffection in the armed forces and/or to win the backing of key military leaders for a coup attempt. Civilians thus tend to enmesh the military in politics by plotting with key military leaders.

12. In another sense, the military has little leeway for choice. Involvement is inherent in the primary function of the military in Latin America; that is, to support the constitutional regime and maintain internal peace and order. It is axiomatic that self-preservation is the priority concern of government. And even today in Latin America, most regimes must divert a substantial portion of their financial resources and energies from more constructive services in the pursuit of this elusive objective. As the fulcrum of survival, the military cannot avoid close association in the public mind with the policies of any incumbent regime.

13. The officers, particularly the top leaders, must ipso facto risk their futures in supporting, withholding support, or taking direct action against a government in power. To protect their own skins, military officers often feel that they must keep in touch with public opinion and determine

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at what point an administration has alienated the powerful political elements which are essential to stability. Otherwise they may find themselves forced to command their units to shoot students, strikers, and political agitators promoting anti-government violence--actions which are serious blows to military prestige, however justified such counter-action may be in a legal sense. Personal survival is thus a major concern to top officers who determine the political moves of their commands; they realize that the spoils system is not restricted to the civilians in government and may sweep them in its path in the event they wind up on the losing side in the political game. To a large degree, once an officer reaches the top ranks in the command structure he must be--voluntarily or involuntarily--a politician as well as a military man. He knows that he is accepted as a participant in the political game, and that the rules of the game bar no holds.

14. In addition to control of arms and physical force, the armed forces have other tactical and strategic advantages over civilian political groups in the perennial political struggle in Latin America. The army and other service branches are enduring institutions. Governments of varying orientations, parties and leaders have come and gone in kaleidoscopic fashion, but the military institutions remain. Officers may lose in the shuffle of political cards by overbetting their hands; they may have been farmed out on foreign diplomatic assignments for excessive political ambitions or suspected plotting; exiled or jailed for failing in a coup attempt; yet they know that one day they may have a chance to return to duty with the right change of names in the presidential palace. Meanwhile their brother officers will be sympathetic in court martial proceedings or in passing decision on the retention of pensions and other emoluments, and the indispensable institution for public peace and order will survive. Moreover, the members of the armed forces are probably held in higher esteem (or fear) by the public at large than civilian political parties and their leaders, thus providing the officers with a professional and economic status and job security which is not available to the leaders of the prototype personal political party in Latin America.

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15. From another standpoint, the military institution offers a citizen one of the few attractive and reliable paths for a government career, far more so than most parties. Indeed in some countries the military services appear to be a species of political party, and, like the New York Yankees in baseball, the one most likely to enjoy consistent success. The military also offers comparatively good opportunities for professional training and other education through military academies, as well as good salaries and fringe benefits in relation to the civil list.

16. In contrast, a person seeking a civilian political or governmental career confronts a thorny and hazardous future, particularly since the development of non-political civil service merit systems is only in the rudimentary stage of formation in most Latin American countries.

Metamorphosis of Militarism in Latin America

17. Until the early decades of the 20th century, political action by the armed forces in Latin America was conducted arbitrarily, with little concern for the reaction of organized pressure groups. The military caudillo who captured the presidency by coup usually carried out the operation in a swift and often bloodless manner, with the support of the garrison in the capital. He may or may not have had formal military training to justify the title he had adopted or forced the government to confer upon him. Frequently, the caudillo was merely a shrewd demagogic politician masquerading in a uniform, who inspired fear, respect, or admiration among his followers. Whatever knowledge he had of military strategy and tactics was often derived from the seat of his pants in the saddle rather than in the military classroom, on the drill field, or in battle experience. Having seized power, the military leader seldom had any intention of challenging the socio-economic power of the oligarchy which controlled the nation's resources.

18. The military institution and its political practices have altered markedly since 1940. The

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transformation is not unrelated to the striking trend toward urbanization and industrialization and the concomitant social and political changes throughout much of the area, particularly the multiplication of political parties, student, labor, and business organizations, and other pressure groups. All of these must be taken into account to some extent in present-day political action. The simple, protozoan anatomy of the old-style coup has become a more complex organism.

19. The military also have become more sophisticated politically, more strictly professional in orientation, more qualified in the military arts. Military responsibilities have gradually come to comprehend "civic action programs," designed to promote economic and social development but also serving to link the military with a broader segment of the public and to improve military relations with the people at large.

20. The officer corps usually is one of the better educated sectors of a society where trained leadership is at a premium. The curricula of military schools have expanded and broadened, and the level of instruction has generally improved. Opportunities for advanced foreign training, especially in the United States, have increased since World War II. Several top officers in most Latin American countries have been exposed to this type of broadening educational experience and at the same time to American concepts of civilian-military relationships in government.

21. Domestic and foreign pressures and developments have also forged modifications in the political outlook of the armed forces. Service organizations have expanded in size and complexity. While still the dominant component, the army is no longer the single spokesman for the military establishment in matters political, particularly when strong action such as a coup is under consideration. Thus, the traditional service unity, in which the army played the decisive role, has been somewhat diluted by the development of sizable naval and air forces in several countries.

22. These little-brother branches of the service have at times demonstrated their political independence

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of the army. For example, the Ecuadorean air force shattered military unity after the ouster of President Velasco Ibarra in November 1961, and prevented the army from imposing its political choice on the nation. The Argentine navy revolted unsuccessfully on its own in 1963 against the political policy of the majority elements of the army.

23. Similarly, unity within the army for political action is more difficult to attain, as was pointed up by internal political dissension within the Brazilian ground forces over the accession to the presidency of then Vice President Joao Goulart in August 1961. There has also been serious division within the Argentine army for several years over an acceptable government policy toward Peronists. The increasing difficulty of attaining political unity within and among the military services has probably been a deterrent on many occasions in recent years to arbitrary coup action.

24. Military leaders plotting political moves in the past two decades have generally felt compelled to estimate public reaction, including the prospects of violence by civilian groups, and to win at least a minimum of civilian collaboration. The potentially violent or passive opposition of sizable civilian organizations is apparently a strong new deterrent to hastily conceived military coup attempts, as illustrated by the innumerable military and military-civilian efforts to overthrow President Betancourt and the predecessor interim regime in Venezuela after the fall of General Pérez Jiménez in 1958. This factor was also influential in forcing the Ecuadorean army leaders to accept, however reluctantly, Vice President Arosemena as the new chief of state in November 1961.

25. Along with its awareness of the strength and importance of pressure groups, the Latin American military is also displaying an increasing concern over its public position and prestige, both at home and abroad. The dismissal of most of the

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old officer corps in Bolivia after the MNR Revolution of 1952 and the subsequent establishment of civilian paramilitary forces to balance the regular army was a sobering example to the military in the rest of Latin America. But the initial liquidation of the Cuban armed forces by the Castro regime has undoubtedly had the most resounding psychological impact on the military in the area. Concomitantly the military policy of Revolutionary Cuba has sharpened and at times accounted for real or exaggerated military fears of Castroism and Communism elsewhere in Latin America and is at least partly responsible for a seeming resurgence of hasty military interventions against constituted governments.

26. The military's collaboration with civilian groups in recent coups and civilian cooperation in de facto regimes are important appendages of the new-style coup anatomy. They reflect a growing degree of public relations "sense," awareness of the strength of civilian pressure groups, and a tacit recognition that civilians should nominally control the administration under "normal" circumstances. In contrast to the past, a coup is seldom carried out today in which only military considerations are important.

27. The reasons, motives, and pretexts for militarism are also more complex today than they were 30 years ago. The armed forces in many countries have acted with bona fide concern to meet an ostensible or imagined threat to the security of their institution, to their careers, and to their responsibilities as guardians of the constitution and public order. Armed forces intervention in Argentina in recent years, for example, sprang from a real or exaggerated fear of the resurgence of Peronism and its potential impact on the military establishment. Often the underlying motive for political action is to maintain the military role as ultimate arbiter of the political destiny of the nation, including umpire status among bickering civilian political factions.

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28. Another reason for armed forces intervention is the default, ineptitude, or excesses of an incumbent civilian or military regime which tends to result in political stalemate, stagnation of government administration, and a breakdown of public order. Often there is widespread approval for such action, as occurred with the ouster of former Conservative President Laureano Gomez in Colombia in 1953 and again with the removal of his military successor, General Rojas Pinilla, four years later. A more recent case was the military takeover of government from President Carlos Arosemena of Ecuador.

29. The alleged expansion of Communist influence in government has served the military for both cause and occasion of intervention, and partly reflects military awareness of US official attitudes and the desire to mollify anticipated opposition from this country. However, civilian politicians are responsible to some degree for the existence of the pretext because they are in fact excessively complacent toward Communist political and subversive tactics. Although Communist infiltration of student, labor, and political groups and even bureaucracies is widespread in Latin America, Communist parties have no independent capability for seizing control of any country. On the other hand, the officer class in Latin America is strongly anti-Communist and genuinely concerned with the long-range threat which Communism and Castroism pose, and has taken steps to keep the armed forces relatively free of Communist infiltration. Military awareness of the threat of Communism and Castroism to their institutions, however, does not impede its use for immediate political expediency, as recently exemplified in the Dominican Republic and Honduras.

30. Still another cause of military intervention springs from the encouragement and collaboration of opposition political groups who seek to subvert elements of the armed forces and provoke their action against the incumbent regime in order to attain power or a greater share in its exercise. Such

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collaboration is evident in the composition of the de facto military regimes in Ecuador, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic--the latest coup examples in the area. While it is true that the military often takes political action on its own initiative to satisfy the ambitions of individual leaders or attain the selfish objectives of the military establishment, many of the coups of recent years in Latin America might have been prevented if there had been a show of unity among opposition political groups in support of the regime in power, or if the seed of coup action had not been planted within the military by the disgruntled political "outs."

31. During the past decade the optimists rooting for civilian democracy in Latin America had pointed to the overthrow, death, or retirement from power of Rojas Pinilla in Colombia, Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela, Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, Manuel Odría in Peru, Juan Perón in Argentina, and others, as signalling a new "democratic era" in the region. These optimists for the most part have subsequently joined the Pessimists' Club as the result of military intervention against elected civilian regimes in Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras, and the rumblings of possible military coups in Brazil and Venezuela.

32. Democratic traditions in particular nations cannot be firmly rooted even over a period of decades; nor can it be demonstrated that the military has been the major obstacle to such growth. Three successive civilian governments were elected in Ecuador after 1948, and all three presidents completed their constitutional terms in office, the single term being a unique development in this country; many observers evaluated this as the establishment of democratic, civilian tradition. Subsequent events have demonstrated the fallacy of such a hasty conclusion. The collapse of democratic rule in Argentina, one of the most advanced countries in Latin America, demonstrates that even a seemingly well established

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tradition of civilian rule can be shattered under given circumstances. Brazil's traditions of civilian democracy are certainly being subjected to the severe strains of irresponsible leadership, political radicalism, and economic deterioration.

33. A more reliable--or better, a less hazardous--appraisal of militarism may be derived from an examination of the trends noted above in the more subtle metamorphosis of the militaristic influence on politics. These include: the growing non-political and professional outlook in the officer corps, along with a concomitant rise in the educational standard of its membership; a reluctance of the military to seize power arbitrarily without strong public acceptance or tacit consent; closer association with civilian groups in interim military administration; an endorsement of the need for basic reforms; and a willingness to relinquish power, seized extralegally, within a reasonable period of time to civilian authority after the motives for a coup have been satisfied. This is not to imply that the military has not acted and will not continue to act arbitrarily and irresponsibly in certain countries in opposition to democratic practices.

34. The role of the military in Latin America is unquestionably a more responsible one, and more favorable to stability and to democracy, than it was at the turn of the century. Ever since World War II, the military has shown an increasing respect for democratic political practices and effective civilian administration. Moreover, although subjective generalizations cannot be proved or disproved, the military class has displayed a greater awareness of national goals and the crying need for socio-economic reform than other elements of the ruling oligarchies, which have tended to be reactionary in their grasp of privilege and power.

35. The exercise of US pressures on the military in Latin America could have a perceptible impact on militarism and could be a strong deterrent to the

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36. Militarism is as much the by-product or reflection of political, social, and economic conditions and Latin American values and traditions, as a cause of the authoritarianism and instability chronic to the area. Militarism--often erroneously equated to all authoritarianism--would not have flourished and persisted had not these fundamental conditions provided continuing nourishment. No foreign influence can easily or readily alter the imbedded political habits and institutions which are characteristic of Latin America--habits and institutions which are alien to the Anglo-Saxon and difficult to judge by Anglo-Saxon standards.

37. The definitive subordination of the military to civilian leadership in government and the removal of the military from politics will depend to a large degree on the demonstration by civilians of their ability to govern effectively and honestly within the Latin American framework. This in turn hinges upon the establishment of a tradition of loyal and constructive political opposition which takes its chances on victory at the ballot box to attain power and accepts the outcome with patriotism and good sportsmanship, rather than turning to the path of plotting and obstruction. Both effective civilian government and a loyal political opposition are notably lacking in Latin America. When these lacunae are filled, militarism in the area is likely to decline.

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